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SUBJECT: Sitrep 7: March 25 Protests End In Violence

1. (U) Summary: When police denied an estimated 7,000 protesters access to October Square for the March 25 "Freedom Day" rally, opposition leaders Aleksandr Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin led the crowd to the alternate meeting point Yanka Kupala Park. Milinkevich used this opportunity to launch the "Movement to Liberate the People of Belarus" and to invite the crowd to join him at a protest on April 26 on the anniversary of the Chernobyl accident before telling the crowd to disperse peacefully and go home. Kozulin, however, encouraged the crowd to follow him on a three-kilometer march to the Okrestina detention center where protesters were being detained after the March 24 police raids on the October Square tent city. Riot police violently broke up the march led by Kozulin using smoke and percussion grenades and arrested at least 100 people, including Kozulin. Milinkevich publicly blamed the police and Kozulin for the outbreak of violence on March 25, but also offered Kozulin "moral support." Opposition youth held a candle light vigil on March 26 as a gesture of solidarity with those who were beaten and detained while the pro-Lukashenko youth group (BRSM) are demonstrating in front of the U.S. and other Western embassies to protest Western "interference in the internal affairs" of Belarus. End Summary.

#### Police Deny Demonstrators Access to October Square

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2. (U) At noon on October Square on March 25, approximately 7,000 people attempted to gather to protest the police crackdown on the opposition tent camp on March 24 and to celebrate the 88th anniversary of Belarus' "Freedom Day," which marks the country's brief independence from Russia in 1918. However, significant OMON and Special Forces presence as well as "human chain-link" barricades prevented the demonstrators from accessing the square. Several thousand demonstrators carrying flags and chanting "Long Live Belarus!", who had gathered in front of the State Department Store (GUM), attempted to break through the police barrier but were pushed back by riot police. Another smaller group of approximately 2,000 people who had gathered on the other side of October Square were also denied access by police.

#### Rally Moves to Yanka Kupala Park

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3. (U) When the security forces refused to allow the crowd to access the Square, opposition leaders Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin called on the protesters to march to the alternate meeting location at Yanka Kupala Park, approximately one-half a kilometer away from October Square. A strong police presence accompanied the demonstrators to the next meeting spot, but allowed approximately 8,000 activists to gather in Yanka Kupala Park to hear speeches

from Milinkevich and Kozulin. The crowd, however, prevented two state Belarusian Television (BT) journalists from entering the park by pelting them with snowballs and shouted "Shame!" at them for the negative BT coverage of the demonstrations.

#### Milinkevich Launches Movement; Kozulin Marches to Okrestina

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¶4. (U) According to independent media sources, Milinkevich used the 2:00p.m. rally in Yanka Kupala Park as a forum to launch the "Popular Movement for the Liberation of Belarus," with a slogan of "Freedom, Truth, Justice." Milinkevich promised the crowd that the opposition would not wait until the next presidential elections to mobilize and invited those present to participate in another session of the Congress of Democratic Forces (date to be determined). Milinkevich expressed his disappointment that 200,000 people failed to gather at the October Square Election Day protest on March 19 because "if that had occurred, the regime would have fallen." [Note: In several press releases, Milinkevich had instructed followers in the regions not to come to Minsk on Election Day, but instead to go to their local polling stations to find out the announced results and wait there.] Milinkevich invited all the protestors to attend an upcoming demonstration on April 26 in remembrance of the Chernobyl accident.

¶5. (U) Independent media reported that Milinkevich called on the crowd to disperse peacefully, but Kozulin urged everyone to follow him to the Okrestina detention center, where police were holding several hundred demonstrators from the March 24 police raid of the tent city at October Square, in order "to liberate the newest heroes of Belarus."

#### March to Okrestina Ends in Violence

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¶6. (U) As Kozulin led approximately 2,500 demonstrators from Yanka Kupala Park to the Okrestina detention center, riot police blocked the crowd on the road near the railroad bridge on Dzerzhinskovo Avenue. Kozulin's office claimed that Kozulin talked with special police force (SOBR) commander Colonel Dmitry Pavlichenko, explaining that the rally was peaceful and organized and asked Pavlichenko not to use force. Independent press reports that the police set off percussion and smoke grenades and beat their shields with batons as they advanced toward the crowd that was chanting "Long live Belarus!" and "Fascists!".

¶7. (U) According to a Belapan journalist, police brutally kicked and beat many activists, including women, leaving at least two people immobilized on the ground. Police set off three percussion grenades to stop the crowd from advancing. Police forced dozens of people, many of whom were covered in blood, into wagons and took them to detention centers. Independent media reported that police searched for and captured demonstrators who took refuge in private backyards and nearby stores.

#### MOI Defends Police Decision to Disperse Crowd

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¶8. (U) Claiming that Kozulin called on the crowd and Yanka Kupala Park to "seize power by force, attack state and guarded facilities and even to physically liquidate the head of state," Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov said that the police's decision to disperse the oncoming crowd was "adequately" justified. Naumov claimed that the police did not apply "special means" to disperse the crowd and that the protesters set off an unidentified bomb. Naumov reported that eight police officer and Interior Troops soldiers were injured when protesters threw stones and bottles at the police. Naumov stated that the police arrested only the most active participants and promised that a decision about their charges and prosecution would be made soon.

#### Kozulin Among the Many Arrested and Detained

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¶9. (U) Human rights activists report that approximately 100 people were arrested, including Kozulin, when the crowd met up with the police on Dzerzhinskovo Avenue. Interior Minister Naumov claimed "Kozulin, who was at the front of the procession, entered into open conflict with police officers and...broke a police video camera." [Note: Belapan reported that numerous witnesses at the scene did not see Kozulin break any cameras.] Independent media and youth group activists reported that police kicked and beat Kozulin before taking him to the Zhodino detention center. Kozulin's press office reported that he faces a hooliganism charge under Article 339 of the Criminal Code. No one can confirm where Kozulin is right now; his wife has appealed to state authorities to release his whereabouts.

¶10. (SBU) Freelance American journalist Michael Schwartz [protect accordingly] was roughed up by police near October Square on March ¶25. He claimed that approximately 25 Special Force officers kicked, punched and beat demonstrators. He presented video footage of the beatings to Emboffs.

¶11. (U) Belapan reported that prominent Russian journalist and outspoken critic of Lukashenko Pavel Sheremet was arrested on March ¶25. Sheremet told reporters that police handcuffed and blindfolded him before beating him repeatedly in a police vehicle. Sheremet was held at the Okrestina detention center before his release on March 27. Sources informed Post that all the charges were dropped and Sheremet is being deported.

¶12. (U) Independent media reported that police detained Milinkevich spokesman Pavel Mozheiko on March 25 for one hour at the Tsentralny district police station and promised to initiate criminal proceedings for resisting an officer.

Milinkevich Blames Kozulin for Violence But Offers Support  
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¶13. (U) On March 25 in an interview with Ekho Moskvyy, Milinkevich blamed Saturday's outbreak of violence in Minsk on the police, who used brutal force on the demonstrators, and Kozulin, who urged the demonstrators to march to the Okrestina detention center. Milinkevich said that the united opposition forces had decided that the March 25 demonstration in honor of "Freedom Day" should be peaceful and festive, thereby suggesting Kozulin should not have

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led the people to Okrestina.

¶14. (U) During March 26 visit to the Zhodino detention center where Kozulin and the son of Milinkevich's wife are being held, Milinkevich presented a more mollified position on Kozulin and even offered him moral support. Milinkevich stated, "Without any doubt I came to express moral support to Alexander Kozulin. We might have different approaches in strategy and tactics, [but] when someone find himself in prison and was put there against law, I want to morally support him by coming here and checking if he is here. I believe common ground should be sought anyway, regardless of any emotional and tense moments."

Opposition Youth Light Candles for Detainees, No Rally Held  
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¶15. (U) Human rights NGO Charter97 reported in the evening on March 26 several hundred people lit candles on Nemiga Avenue in a gesture of solidarity with those who were beaten and detained during the protests on March 25.

¶16. (U) Separately on March 26, Post heard rumors that youth groups were planning another demonstration on March 26 at 18:30 at either October Square or at the place where police had arrested Kozulin. While many security forces and OMON were present on October Square at 18:30, Emboffs did not see any demonstrators at either October Square or the place on Nemiga Avenue where Kozulin was arrested. Police permitted people to walk through the square, but immediately

broke up any pockets of people who congregated even momentarily.

Demonstrations at the U.S., Polish and Lithuanian Embassies

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¶17. (U) Members of BRSM (Belarusian Republican Youth Union), a pro-Lukashenko state-sponsored youth organization, held rallies in front of the U.S. and Polish embassies on March 26 to protest the countries' "interference in the internal affairs of the state, provocations and Western double standards" as reported by BelTA state news agency and ONT TV channel. BT claimed over 1,000 BRSM members participated in the event. [Note: No more than 100 activists were present in front of the U.S. Embassy.] According to BRSM leader Mikhail Orda, his organization is calling for EU and US to respect Belarus and "stop ignoring the will of Belarusian people."

¶18. (U) On March 26, BT also accused the Lithuanian Embassy of coordinating riots in Belarus. BT reported that the instructions came from Lithuanian Foreign Minister Antanas Valionis and were carried out by the Lithuanian Embassy in Minsk. BT noted that many Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian citizens were among the detained protesters. BT therefore concluded that since "the embassies of these countries have actively tried to have them [i.e. their citizens] released, all street riots occurred on authorization from foreign states and their diplomatic missions."

¶19. (U) On March 27, BRSM held rallies in front of the U.S., Polish, Lithuanian and French embassies. Charter97 reported that Minsk universities have been ordered to send students to participate in these protests. A group of not more than 100 activists holding banners and waving flags stood outside of the U.S. Embassy for most of the day. A pro-Lukashenko communist group also demonstrated in front of the U.S. Embassy on March 27. One of the members of the Communist group handed PAO a statement that read, "The people of Minsk are outraged at the U.S. and OSCE interference into the internal affairs of Belarus and at the incitement of the opposition to disorder. The people have chosen Lukashenko to be the Belarusian president. Is it really satisfactory to you that the whole world hates you? Hands off Belarus!" The statement was signed by the people and Communists of Minsk. [Note: Under Belarusian law a group must apply 15 days in advance to hold a public demonstration. As it is highly unlikely these groups applied for permission to picket a week before the elections, these are unsanctioned demonstrations. However, pro-Lukashenko unsanctioned demonstrations appear to be tolerated.]

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